

Handout

OVERCOMING PROBLEMS - HANDOUT 1



If there is a way to overcome a problem, then there's no need to worry, because there's a way. If there's no way to overcome it, then no use to worry too much-- you can't do anything! - Dalai Lama

The way we cope with life's difficulties can have a major effect on our sense of well-being. It is very easy to feel overwhelmed by difficulties, that life is "just a mess". Or, you may find yourself ruminating and worrying about a problem without actually solving it. These guides provide a structured programme to help you solve your current problems and also give you a set of skills to effectively deal with difficulties in the future.

How to use this handout

There are four separate guides in this set. We suggest you print the first one out, read through it and complete the exercises over the course of a week or so. After that, print off Handout 2, complete the exercises and so on. It is best to give yourself a few weeks to work through them as this is likely to produce more lasting benefit than rushing through it.

Our own answers

The best solutions to difficulties are usually the ones people think up themselves. This is because no one knows our situation as well as we do. Also, when a person solves a problem, it increases their confidence and makes them feel more able to solve future problems. The ability to solve problems is something you already have - it is how you have managed to cope with life so far. This series of

handouts is designed to help you tap into this ability to solve the problems that are currently troubling you. Although it will take a little time you will be tackling the root problem rather than "papering over the cracks".

Identifying Problems



Emotional problems - and some physical problems - are usually a sign that something in our lives needs looking at. The mind and body is a finely tuned instrument and if we have a need that is being neglected the body will often signal it with symptoms. This does not mean we should blame ourselves for being unwell. Self-blame is often part of the problem and stops us acting effectively. Below are two examples of hidden problems:

Paul had a demanding job in the Parks Department, supplying both plants and equipment to the town gardeners. He was also learning a new computer system for the control of these supplies. Paul had been doing these jobs for only two years and his responsibilities were growing. He had saved nearly enough to buy a new car, and knew that his prospects were good - but he was not happy. He dragged himself out of bed to go to work, kept forgetting details of the new computer programme and was never satisfied with himself. It was becoming harder and harder to concentrate on the job, and he had to make ever increasing efforts to keep going. His girlfriend noticed that he seemed depressed and asked him how he was feeling, but he simply said that everyone was overloaded by the changes in the office.

Mandy was a single parent, with a two years old daughter, Lizzie. The break up with Lizzie's father had been difficult and there were still arguments about his access. As well as looking after Lizzie, Mandy often looked after her friend's children and paid a daily visit to her mother, who was unwell. She wanted to be able to cope with whatever was thrown at her. But she felt troubled. She had started to worry about "silly" things, like whether Lizzie would make friends at school, and whether Lizzie was as happy and contented as she appeared. Although she knew that Lizzie was fine, the worries continued, and she became increasingly bad tempered, both with Lizzie and her friends. She resented it when people asked her what the matter was since it only made her feel worse. She was angry that they could not see how many demands were being made on her, and did not make allowances for her moods.

Here is a list of possible things that your problems might relate to. Could any of these be causing you difficulty?

*Marital
Parents
Money*

*Sexual
Friends
Drinking*

*Children
Work
Gambling*

Taking on too much

Standing up for yourself

Restriction in lifestyle caused by a physical illness

Are there any other things that get you down?

Recognising that there is a difficulty

Paul's girlfriend helped him talk about his job more. He explained how he hated his job. Rather than spend his time outdoors as he first had, Paul was increasingly behind his desk fighting with a computer.

Mandy was confused by her feelings and embarrassed when she let her irritability show to friends. At first she thought this was just a temporary phase, but one Sunday when a friend offered to look after Lizzie so Mandy could take some time for herself, she lost her temper. She was shocked and upset by the strength of her feelings. It took her a long time to calm down and when she did she said to herself "I've got to do something about this". That evening alone, for the first time she started to think about what was going on.

Are you avoiding something?

Paul had avoided talking to his girlfriend about his difficulties. When he began to talk he recognised that he was also avoiding many other things like upsetting his parents, admitting his unhappiness, making a change, taking a risk, and possibly going for an interview.

Mandy had avoided thinking about the problem altogether. Once she admitted that her bad feelings weren't going to go away of their own accord she started to wonder what was making her feel so irritable and tense. Gradually her thoughts became clearer. She felt that being a good mother meant always being strong for Lizzie and being with her 24 hours a day. Taking time for herself felt like a sign of weakness, even though before Lizzie was born she used to enjoy going out for meals with friends. She felt she would be letting her friends down if she ever said "no" to babysitting for their children.

Writing Your Problem List

Use the last sheet of this handout to write one or more problems you would like to tackle. It's helpful if you can boil down each problem into a sentence or two.

Things that might help with this are:

- **taking a break** - even a short one, get away from the situation to allow yourself time and space to put things into perspective. Difficulties can often be seen more clearly from a distance and when you're not in the thick of them.
- **using you "gut feeling"** - think about what irritates you most - what the trouble spots are. This is particularly useful if you feel generally dissatisfied but cannot put your finger on where in your life the main problems are. Is it work or home? Is it weekends or weekdays?
- **talking** - to someone you know well and trust
- after reading this handout, **taking a couple of days** to think about the list before filling it in.

"I don't just have one problem but loads!"

If this applies to you, these handouts may be particularly helpful. Listing your problems one by one helps to break your difficulties down into smaller parts you can deal with one at a time. It also helps you to "stand back" from your situation rather than feeling overwhelmed.

"I know what the problems are but I can't think what to do about them"

That's OK. As we said, this approach will take some time to do. If you follow it step by step you should notice an improvement in a few weeks. Patience - especially with yourself - can be very helpful here.

"I don't seem to have any real problems in my life"

Problems can include our own attitudes as well as the external situation. For example, are any of these typical of you?

- *always putting myself down or "beating myself up"*
- *thinking about what might go wrong rather than what might go right*
- *perfectionism - setting myself unrealistically high standards*

These thinking problems can also be tackled by the approach we are taking here. Think carefully about your situation over a few days. If you still cannot think of any problems which may be underlying your symptoms, this course may not be for you. You may wish to discuss this further with your doctor or nurse.

MY PROBLEMS

Date:

List one or more problems below:

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

Continue on the back of this sheet if necessary

OVERCOMING PROBLEMS - HANDOUT 2

Congratulations! If you have got this far you are clearly making a serious effort to make things better for yourself. Even though there may be some hard work ahead, you are well on your way to making your life better.

Select One Goal

The next step is to select one problem from the list you made in the last handout that you want to work on first. Which one you choose is up to you but we suggest starting with the one that looks the easiest (or least difficult!) to solve. On your problem list, place a ring round the number of the problem you've chosen.

Brainstorming



Now is the time to start thinking about possible solutions. The idea is to think up possible ways of solving your chosen problem. The more ideas you can think up the better. Use the sheet at the back of this handout to do this.

- It is important to write down every suggestion you think of, even if it seems unrealistic or ridiculous. The idea is to free up your creative thinking. Selecting solutions will come later.
- Feel free to include things you're already doing to try and solve the problem

Mandy had selected the goal "Spend half an hour relaxing each day". With the brainstorming, she came up with the following list, to help her find the time to do this

- *Send Lizzie to nursery for a while each day*
- *Ask the neighbour to look after Lizzie*
- *Forget about housework for the next 3 years*
- *Sit and relax while Lizzie sleeps in the afternoon rather than catching up on household tasks*
- *Find a gym with a creche and go to the sauna*
- *Join a babysitting circle*
- *Make up with my sister [who Mandy stopped speaking to 6 months ago] and ask her to look after Lizzie*

My selected problem is (from the form at the end of handout 1):

Possible Solutions :

Write as many ideas as you can think of below (whether sensible or not!)

Continue on the back of this sheet if necessary

OVERCOMING PROBLEMS - HANDOUT 3

So, at the end of the last handout you selected a problem and wrote out a list of possible solutions. Now is the time to start deciding on the best course of action.



Pros and cons

The first step is to consider the pros (advantages) and cons (disadvantages) of each possible solution. You can do this just by thinking about each one but it is often useful to write these down. A sheet is provided for this at the back of this handout. Here, as an example, is Mandy's list from the last handout:

Selected Problem: Not getting enough time for myself		
Suggestion	Pros	Cons
Send Lizzie to a nursery each day.	Would give me plenty of time each day and there are nurseries nearby.	Not sure that nurseries take 2 year olds unless you go to a private one and I can't afford that.
Ask the neighbour to look after Lizzie.	Very handy - right next door - no time spent travelling.	The neighbour is unlikely to want to babysit every day - she has her own life.
Forget about housework for the next 3 years.	Would save a heck of a lot of time and effort!	Completely unrealistic - the place wouldn't be hygienic for Lizzie - although I could do some of the jobs less often.
Sit and relax while Lizzie sleeps in the afternoon.	Very easy to arrange - I don't even have to leave the house.	Lizzie doesn't always sleep in the afternoon and it won't be long before she stops this nap entirely.
Find a gym with a creche and go to the sauna.	I'd love a daily sauna and there's a gym nearby.	This would be costly - I can't really afford it.

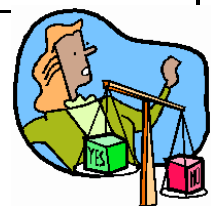
Suggestion	Pros	Cons
Join a babysitting circle.	My friend's in a circle like this - I'd probably be able to join that one.	I'm not sure I could stand a lot of different people looking after Lizzie, plus I couldn't do it every day.
Make up with my sister and ask her to babysit.	It would be great speaking to my sister again.	It wouldn't be very nice making up to her then asking her to look after Lizzie. Anyway, it's <i>her</i> that's not speaking to <i>me!</i>

Choosing a Solution

Doing the pros and cons should make it easier to decide which is the best thing to do next. Depending on your goal, this could be a "quick fix" or might mean focussing on longer term improvement rather than the short-term.

Mandy decided to use Lizzie's afternoon nap for relaxing. This was quick and easy and would give her some much needed space.

"I can't decide on the best solution"



There can be several reasons for this:

- ***No suggestion seems good enough*** - bear in mind that there is no such thing as a perfect solution or decision. Are you setting yourself unrealistically high standards? What we *can* do is do what seems the best thing in each situation. This may not be ideal, but it doesn't need to be in order to improve things.
- ***I might make the wrong choice*** - there is always an element of guesswork in doing anything as we can't look into the future and see exactly how it is going to turn out. With many problems, doing something different is better than doing nothing or going on in the same old way. You can use your "gut feeling" to help you. Even if things don't work out as hoped for, we can learn something useful from this.
- ***Two of the suggestions seem equally good*** - well, maybe it doesn't matter too much which one you do. Just try one and see.

"The more I think about what to do, the more I seem to go round in circles"

The problem solving approach is about thinking positively about difficulties, but sometimes we can get caught up in worry, which then becomes part of the problem. If you find yourself worrying, try to distract yourself by doing or thinking about something different. You might have to distract yourself many, many times because the worry keeps returning, but if you keep doing this you will eventually break the habit of worrying. Also, if it seems helpful, just forget about the whole problem for a couple of days so you can come back to it with a fresh mind.

Go ahead and do your chosen solution

It can be helpful to plan your course of action, or break it down into smaller steps. For example, if Mandy had chosen her first suggestion of using a nursery, her first step would be to have found out if any local nurseries took 2 year olds for free or for very little cost.

Mandy had to plan by thinking about how she would spend her time when Mandy was asleep. She preferred reading to watching daytime TV or making things so she decided to go to the library to find a good novel. She also thought she would treat herself to a nice warm bath with scented bath oil when she felt like it.

In the next handout, we'll talk about checking how well the chosen solution is working. Even when things go well, we recommend you go back to your doctor or nurse one more time to get the final handout - this could be useful in the future.

<i>Possible Solutions (using the list you made at the end of Handout 2)</i>	<i>Pros</i>	<i>Cons</i>

(Continue on the back of this sheet if necessary)

My chosen solution and plan is:

OVERCOMING PROBLEMS - HANDOUT 4



How did it go?

Now is the time to take stock of things. There are three possible types of outcome:

1. The problem is a lot better

Well done! What you have done has worked. Solving a problem isn't always a dramatic affair. What can happen is that we suddenly realise we haven't thought about the problem for quite a while. It's only when we think about it that we realise that it's no longer a problem. Or, it may be that the external circumstances haven't changed but we have learned how to cope with it better. For example, our boss may still be moody but we can now shrug it off by saying to ourselves "That's his problem, it needn't bother me".

If there was more than one problem on the list you made in Handout 1, you can now tackle another problem in the same way.

2. The problem is slightly better

This is probably the most common outcome. What you have done has improved things, so that's good. There's still a bit further to go. To improve further, you can do one of several things:

- *Keep doing what's working* - it may be that persistence is all that is required to move further forward.
- *Go on to another goal* - check your goal list. You may have solved one problem but there might be something else you need to work on.
- *Choose another option from the brainstorming* - another possible solution may be worth trying. Have another look at your Pros and Cons list to consider another course of action. It may even be that another possibility occurs to you that you haven't yet thought of. Or a combination of suggestions may work rather than one.

Paul (from Handouts 1 & 2) had decided to go to the gym twice a week to try and feel more energetic. This helped him feel less tired generally but he still felt unsatisfied at his work and couldn't concentrate on learning the new computer programme. He decided to try a combination of two of his other possible solutions from the brainstorming. He would talk to his boss about changing his duties, so he could spend more time working outside again, **and** he would also start looking for other jobs, in case his present job didn't improve.

3. The problem is no better

The first thing to think about here is whether your plan has had time to work. There may be no clear improvements as yet, but you may have a sense that if you continue for longer, things will get better. If this is not the case, it's worth doing several things at this point:

1. *Ask if anything is different at all* - for example, you may have had a bad week this week but last week you felt better than you have done for several months. Or, even if your suggested solution didn't work out you may have learned something from this that might be useful in the future.
2. *Try another option from the brainstorming*
3. *Check you have applied the approach correctly* - is there a step you have missed, or something you are not clear about? If need be, discuss it with your doctor, nurse or someone you are close to.

We hope that this leads to an improvement. If not, you can at least give yourself credit for all the work you've put into doing this. You may wish to go back to your doctor or nurse to discuss other possible ways forward.

Keep Doing What Works

If you have found these handouts helpful, do keep them in mind for the future. It is common for people to forget about what's previously been helpful. So, when a new problem comes along in two year's time they completely forget that problem solving was helpful in the past and start to struggle again. Keep these handouts in a safe place so you can refer back to them if you need to. Of course, there is nothing to stop you continuing to use this approach now to solve day to day problems.

WHERE CAN I GET FURTHER HELP?

If, after a few weeks, you feel you are making little progress, then seek help in overcoming your problem. Your GP is the best person to talk to first. Your GP may suggest a talking treatment or tablets or both. He or she may suggest you see a mental health worker who can offer expert help with your problems.

If you feel so distressed that you have thoughts of harming yourself or you feel you are at risk of harming others, then visit your doctor as soon as possible and explain to him or her how you are feeling.

Further Information and Resources

For further information and self-help resources go to Moodjuice online:

<https://www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk>

Moodjuice Forth Valley is a web site designed to offer information and advice to those experiencing troublesome thoughts, feelings and actions. From the site you are able to print off other self-help guides covering conditions such as depression, anxiety, stress, panic and sleep problems. In the site you can explore various aspects of you life that may be causing you some distress and obtain information on organisations, services and other self-help materials, that can offer you support and information which will allow you to help yourself.